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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY

December 20, 2001

Governor Tom Ridge  
Assistant to the President and Director,  
Office of Homeland Security  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Governor Ridge:

Long before the terrorist attack of September 11, our Social Security Subcommittee had begun intensive research and investigation into the exploding problem of identity theft. Now, the fraudulent use of Social Security numbers (SSNs) in commandeering false identities is no longer a problem of individual financial security, but national security.

Our free and open society has had the unintended consequence of enabling terrorists to use SSNs against us, just as they used our own airplanes as bombs. Whether for good or ill, SSNs have become a national identifier. Their use is deeply embedded in the nation's financial and identification system and permeates an individual's lifetime beginning when parents claim a child as an additional tax exemption, to when we apply for a driver's license, to when we start receiving Social Security benefits.

Our hearings on terrorist use of SSNs revealed that these numbers helped crack open the barriers to acquiring photo ID driver's licenses and credit cards. Some numbers were obtained legitimately, but one hijacker held an SSN stolen from an individual who had been dead for ten years. Further, we know that many of the suspects related to the terrorist attacks were apprehended and are now being detained based on evidence of fraudulent SSN use. Further information on the findings of these hearings can be obtained via our web site at: <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/ssnsec.htm>.

The Social Security Administration's Office of Inspector General has played a key role in fighting identity theft and in finding the falsified numbers and suspected terrorists both here and abroad. Their knowledge of the system and ideas about reducing SSN misuse and identity theft will serve as a valuable resource to your office as you work to hunt down terrorists and develop new policies for homeland security.

However, we are convinced more has to be done. As a Time essayist said, "A rattlesnake loose in the living room tends to end all discussion of animal rights." A system where just about anyone can have access to SSNs for whatever purpose without consequence is now unthinkable and cannot continue. Prior to the attacks, we, along with a number of our Ways and Means colleagues, developed H.R. 2036, "The Social Security Privacy and Identity Theft Prevention Act of 2001."

This bipartisan, comprehensive legislation would restrict the sale and public display of SSNs in the public and private sector and establishes civil and criminal penalties for violations. In the private sector, the bill would also limit dissemination of SSNs by credit reporting agencies and make it more difficult for businesses to deny services if a customer refuses to provide his or her SSN. A copy of the bill is enclosed for your review.

We plan to advance this important legislation once Congress returns in January. The Subcommittee Chairman's mark will include further enhancements to the bill, including a provision requiring the Commissioner of Social Security to study changing the way SSNs are issued so that the number itself would reflect work authorization status, among other improvements. With this issue now a domestic security crisis, we welcome the opportunity to work with you and to further tailor this legislation to help counter the threat of terrorism.

Should you or your staff have any further questions, please contact Kim Hildred, Staff Director of the Subcommittee at 225-9263 or Kathryn Olson, Democratic Staff Director at 225-4021.

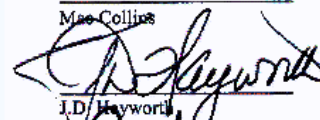
Sincerely,



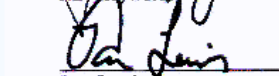
E. Clay Shaw, Jr.  
Chairman



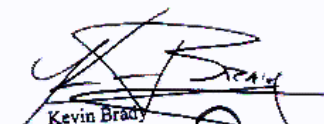
Mac Collins



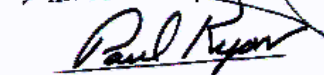
J.D. Hayworth



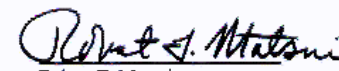
Ron Lewis



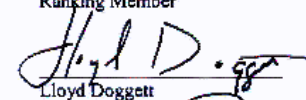
Kevin Brady



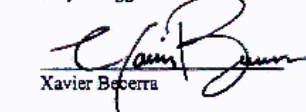
Paul Ryan



Robert T. Matsui  
Ranking Member



Lloyd Doggett



Xavier Bebera